



POLYGAMY IN ARUNACHAL PRADESH: TRADITION, TRANSFORMATION AND CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES

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ABSTRACT

Polygamy, particularly polygyny, remains a deeply embedded practice among several tribal communities in Arunachal Pradesh, despite rising literacy, modernization and growing legal awareness. Rooted in Traditional socioeconomic systems- Including bride price, agriculture labor demands, Lineage preservation and clan alliances-polygamy once served practical and cultural purposes. However, in the modern era, these justifications have eroded and polygyny is increasingly associated with male dominance, wealth-based privilege and exploitation of women/girls.



This paper explores the persistence and evolving dynamics of polygamy in tribal Arunachal Pradesh through field observations, community interviews and legal analysis. It investigates how customary laws, protected under the Indian constitution, continue to permit practices at odds. The study also examines the emerging role of social media, aspirational marriages and economic desperation in reshaping modern polygamy trends.

It concludes by recommending reforms of customary law, enhanced legal oversight, gender-sensitive education, digital literacy and grassroots empowerment programmes for tribal women. A balanced and culturally respectful yet progressive framework is essential to ensure that tradition does not serve as a shield for inequality.

KEYWORDS: Polygamy, Arunachal Pradesh, Customary Law.

1. INTRODUCTION

Polygamy, the state or practice having more than one spouse simultaneously (Garner 2024) the practice of polygamy occupies a unique in human history. It has been practiced across a wide range of cultural and religious traditions from time immemorial. The most common forms of polygamy have been polygyny, in which multiple co-wives share a single husband.

Recent observation indicates that polygamy has been a source of suffering for many women in Arunachal Pradesh, where it has been used as a tool of male dominance. Located in India's northeastern frontier, Arunachal Pradesh is home to more than 26 major tribes and over 100 sub-tribes, each with distinct customs, traditions, and legal practices. Tribal customary law, recognized and respected within the states autonomous governance structures, often diverges from mainstream Indian civil law. One such divergence is the continuing acceptance of polygamy and in the fewer cases, polyandry.

Despite modernization, increased literacy, and the spread of education, polygamy has not declined significantly in Arunachal Pradesh. In fact in some communities, it appears to be increasing.

Polygamy remains a notable cultural institution among certain tribal groups, particularly the Galo, Adi and Nyisi tribes.

In this paper the author seeks to explore and analyze the reason behind the rise in polygamy in Arunachal Pradesh through observation, investigation and interviews, utilizing both primary and secondary sources.

2. CUSTOMARY LAW AND THE LEGALITY OF POLYGAMY

The Hindu Marriage act, 1955, is a significant piece of legislation passed by the Indian parliament that codifies and amends laws related to marriage among Hindus. The Act applies to Hindu, Buddhist, jains and Sikhs and governs various aspects of marriage, including solemnization, divorce, restitution of conjugal rights and judicial separation.

One of the key features of Hindu Marriage Act is its prohibition of polygamy. Under this act, a Hindu man or woman cannot have more than one living spouse at a time. Violation of this provision is considered an offence under Indian penal law.

Tribal groups in Arunachal Pradesh are governing by customary laws, which are protected under Article 371(H) of the Indian Constitution. This constitutional provision grants special status to the state, allowing it to preserve its tribal traditions and customary legal systems.

Under these customary systems, practices such as polygamy are not only legal but are also often socially accepted and structurally supported. For instance, among the Galo tribe of Arunachal Pradesh, both polygamy and polyandry are traditionally recognized. These practices are deeply embedded in the tribes' social structure and cultural norms.

This situation highlights the legal pluralism in India, where customary law continues to coexist with national legislation, particularly in tribal regions. While this arrangement allows for the preservation of indigenous culture and traditions, it also raise important question about uniformity, gender equality and legal rights under the broader framework of Indian civil law. This duality can lead to confusion and debate-while such practices may align with cultural norms, they can sometimes be harmful to women, raising concerns about their rights and status within these communities.

3. HISTORICAL JUSTIFICATION FOR POLYGAMY

3.1 High bride price

Among many tribes in Arunachal Pradesh, the practice of paying a bride price is deeply embedded in marital customs. Bride price includes livestock, beads, ornaments and sometimes land or weapons, making marriage a costly affair. In the past families cope with these expenses by encouraging fraternal polyandry or polygamy-wherein multiple siblings might share a wife or a man might marry multiple wives, spreading economic burdens more evenly.

3.2. Agriculture Labor and Jhum Cultivation

The traditional system of Jhum cultivation (shifting agriculture) required intense physical labor over large plots of mountains land. Having multiple wives or sharing a wife among brothers allowed families to collectively manage farming tasks, distribute workloads and increase productivity. Marriage, therefore, was not only a personal union but an economic and labor alliance.

3.3 Cultural and Traditions

A man's status was often elevated if he had more than one wife, indicating his wealth and ability to provide, multiple wives means more labor force within the household, especially for agriculture and domestic work.

3.4 Socio-economic functions

In agrarian and tribal economies, having multiple wives was often associated with wealth and status.

More wives meant more hands to work in the fields, collect forest produce and manage lives stock-key to survival and prosperity in remote, mountainous terrains.

3.5 Leadership and Authority

Tribal chiefs or elders often practiced polygamy to demonstrate their influence and ability to provide for larger families.

It solidified alliance between clans through marriage, increasing the chief's socio-political capital.

3.6 Widow Remarriage

In many tribal communities of Arunachal Pradesh, polygamy is traditionally accepted, and one key justification is widow remarriage. When a husband dies, man's brother or close male relative to marry the widow. This practice often referred to as levirate marriage; serve multiple social purposes, social and economic protection, preservation of family property, stability for children.

3.7 Customary practices

Many tribes in Arunachal Pradesh follow oral customary laws that permit polygamy.

These customs often emphasizes clan continuation and the importance of lineage. If a wife could not bear children, especially sons, another marriage was culturally acceptable-often with the consent of the first wife.

3.8 The Need for Male Heirs

A central cultural belief in many tribal societies was the necessity of having male children to carry on the family name, perform ancestral rituals and inherit property. Daughters traditionally did not receive property rights. In cases where the first wife failed to produce a son, a second or even third wife was often accepted to fulfill expectations related to lineage and inheritance.

In some tribes. Land and resources passed strictly through male heirs. A man without a son might take another wife to ensure the continuation of his lineage.

3.9 Absence of formal state Intervention

Before the full integration of Arunachal Pradesh into the Indian state structured post-independence, tribal autonomy meant local customs and practices, including polygamy went largely unregulated.

Even today, customary law among tribes is recognized under the Indian constitution (sixth schedule and other provisions) allowing such practices in certain context.

4. Changing times: Education, Law and social awareness with the spread of Education, modernization and constitutional awareness, significant shifts have taken place.

Despite increasing literacy rates and educational advancement, Polygyny continuous to be widely practiced across generations in Arunachal Pradesh, with strong social sanction supporting it. Education alone has failed to bring about a significant shift in public attitudes or behavior regarding this practice.

One of the most vocal opponent of polygyny has been the Arunachal Pradesh women's welfare society (APWWS) .for nearly five decades, the APWWS has persistently campaigned against the practice, underlining just how deeply rooted it is with society .since its establishment in 1979, the organization has remained committed to the eradication of polygamy and the advancement of the rights and welfare of tribal women and children.

In the recent appeal to the Government, The APWWS stated:

"Since its inception in 1979, the Arunachal Pradesh women's welfare society has been unwavering in its commitment to eradicating polygamy and advocating the rights and welfare of tribal

women and children. Despite our sustained efforts, the absence of robust legal provisions continues to pose a significant challenge in our pursuit of gender justice. Such a legislative measures is imperative to uphold the dignity, rights and wellbeing of women in Arunachal Pradesh”

There is a growing sense of awareness, especially among the younger generation, due to increased literacy, legal advocacy and right based awareness campaigns. Urbanization and occupational shifts have also led to reduced dependence on agriculture, thereby lowering the perceived economic need for multiple spouses. These changes are gradually challenging patriarchal traditions. In the current status with regards to polygamy, majority of people discourage polygamy and term it a social evil. Studies suggest that polygyny has been responsible for fragmenting the happiness and contentment within the family. Ninong Ering, MLA and then Member of Parliament made a move to discourage polygamy practice in Arunachal by proposing the Arunachal Pradesh Monogamy Election eligibility Bill, 2023.the purpose of the bill was to amend the existing electoral laws in Arunachal to allow only candidates having one spouse to contest election and hold public office within the state.

Arunachal is witnessing a heavy wave to uproot the practice of polygamy as the majority discourage polygamy, while some section of society still lionize polygamist in the state.

In Arunachal, Community based welfare societies play an impactful and significant role in transforming the society by discouraging polygamy. The Tagin Cultural Society (TCS) in the year 2021, during 5th TCS conference adopted a resolution to bar individuals committing polygamy from holding the post of president and general secretary.

A similar official order was issued by the Galo Welfare society (GWS) on 24 may, 2025, barring polygamist from holding key posts in the GWS. The GWS is a society where elite members of Galo Community assemble together and discuss on social development.

5. CONTEMPORARY TRENDS: THE RISE OF POLYGAMY

Though polygamy are permitted under customary law in many tribal communities of Arunachal Pradesh, Field observation and anecdotal evidence suggests that polygyny is far more prevalent today, while polyandry has become rare. The shift from balanced traditional practices to male-dominated polygamous relationships reveals emerging social and economic patterns shaped by wealth, power, gender dynamics and modern technology.

5.1. Disproportionate polygyny in modern society.

In earlier times, both polygyny and polyandry were response to socio-economic needs, such as high bride prices and labor-intensive agriculture. However, in present day tribal society, polygyny is predominantly practiced by older, wealthy and often educated men, while polyandry has less in numbers disappeared. polygyny today often reflects a combination of patriarchal control and material privilege.

5.2. Role of social media and globalization

Modern technology, especially social media, has radically altered interpersonal connections. Platforms like facebook, instagram and messaging apps-has radically shaped interpersonal relationships. These platforms make it easier for individuals to connect, communicate and form relationships outside traditional boundaries.

Ease of Access: with global connectivity at our fingertips, relationships-sometimes secretive or extramarital are easier to initiate and sustain .the anonymity and convenience offered by digital platforms enable people to engage in relationships that may bypass societal norms.

Lack of regulation: Customary law often does not address relationships formed through digital means, leading to legal and moral loopholes. This regulatory gap is frequently exploited, allowing behaviors that would otherwise be scrutinized or discouraged.

5.3. Aspirational marriages and Economic Desperation.

A troubling modern phenomenon is the increasing number of young girls or teenagers-sometimes still in school-agreeing to marry older, wealthy men.

Desire for a better lifestyle: Many young women from economically disadvantaged background view marriage to wealthy older men as a pathway out of poverty. The decision is often made in the absence of educational or professional alternatives.

Material Greed from both sides: It's not only men pursuing these unions for status or control. Some girls actively seek out these relationships to secure luxurious lifestyles, exploiting the vulnerability or desires of old men.

5.4. Parents or community Normalization: In some case, families may encourage such alliances either due to financial incentives or cultural acceptance. Family don't discourage polygamy instead they encourage as their wish to have big houses or materialistic wish are fulfilled.

5.5. Lack of awareness and empowerment: these patterns also reflect insufficient sex education, lack of legal awareness and absence of strong community structures that make aware both men and women about the trauma that has been created by polygamy which causes mental trauma and broken families in the society.

These emerging patterns challenge both the ethical core of customary law and the broader goal of gender justice and youth protection. While polygamy remains culturally permitted, its misuse under the cover of tradition raises urgent questions.

Are current practices reflective of tribal values or are they distortions driven by greed and exploitation?

Should customary Law evolve to regulate age gaps, consent and welfare in polygamous marriages?

How can the rights of the girls and women be protected in communities where legal oversight is limited?

There is an urgent need for dialogue between tribal's elders, youth, legal advocates and women's rights groups to redefine the scope and limits of customary law in changing society.

6. REASON FOR CONTINUED PRACTICE IN MODERN TIMES

Even in the absence of traditional justification such as pride price pressure or agriculture labor need, polygamy persists. This can be attributed to:

6.1. Cultural inertia

Traditions change slowly. Practices like polygamy are often inherited across generation and justified under the banner of "custom", even when no longer practical.

6.2. Practice and Social Status

In some cases, having multiple wives is considered a symbol of masculinity, prosperity and social rank; it is not about need, but status.

6.3. Gender inequality

Despite growing awareness, many tribal women still lack the empowerment to resist or legally challenges polygamous arrangements. Customary Institutions are often male- dominated, offering women little representation or voice.

6.4. Weak legal enforcement

While tribal autonomy is constitutionally protected, it is also creates a grey area where state laws prohibiting are not strictly enforced. this legal ambiguity contributes to the persistence of such practices.

7. CONCLUSION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS.

The practice of polygamy in tribal communities of Arunachal Pradesh- especially among tribes like Galo, Nyisi and Adi-originated in response to genuine socioeconomic and cultural circumstances. Historically, polygamy (both polygyny and polyandry) served practical purpose. Managing labor in agriculture coping with the burden of bride price, ensuring the continuity of lineage through male heirs and maintaining strong intra – family relationships.

However in the present of context those traditional justifications have significantly diminished with increased access to education, legal awareness, urban employment and modern family structures. Many of the original drivers of polygamy are no longer relevant. Despite this, polygyny continues to be practiced-particularly by economically powerful and socially influential individuals-often with motivations linked more to status, desire and exploitation than to necessity.

New phenomena, such as the impact of social media, aspirational marriages and economic vulnerability of young girls have added complex dimensions to the issue. The rising trend of teenage girls becoming second or third wives to older, wealthy men raises serious ethical, legal and social concerns, especially in communities where customary law is rarely questioned and modern legal systems are not fully enforced.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS AND REFORM SUGGESTIONS

To Address this evolving realities while respecting cultural autonomy. The following policy interventions and community led reforms are recommended.

7.1. Reform customary laws.

Community led legal review boards should be established with each major tribe to review and update customary marriage laws in light of current social and ethical concern.

Introduce age limits, consent protocols and maximum number of marriages into customary legal systems to prevent abuse and exploitation.

Encourage tribal councils to incorporate gender perspectives when interpreting customary norms.

7.2. Legal and government interventions

The state government should work with tribal leaders to create a hybrid legal framework that respects cultural customs while upholding constitutional rights-especially those of women and children.

A legal minimum age for all marriages must be enforced even under customary law. Marriages of underage girls to older men should be investigated and penalized.

Train local legal officers and community leaders to ensure that customary law does not override constitutional protections.

7.3. Education and awareness campaigns

Implement community –wide awareness programs about the consequences of polygamous marriages, targeting both men and women.

Introduce gender sensitive education in schools, especially in rural and tribal areas. to challenge patriarchy and promote equality.

Use local media, folklore, storytelling and village meeting to share message about womens rights, consent and self worth.

7.4. Women Empowerment and Economic Independence.

Support income generating programs and vocational training for tribal women to reduce dependency on marriage for financial security.

Establish safe space, mentorship programs and girls clubs in schools to encourage aspirations beyond early marriage.

Facilitate NGO involvement to work closely with young women and families in raising awareness and providing alternative life paths.

7.5. Digital literacy and media regulations

Conduct digital literacy workshop for both youth and parents to address the misuse of social media in manipulating relationships

Promote responsible use of social platforms and educate teenagers about online exploitation, privacy and digital consent.

Explore policies to regulate online marriage brokerages or platforms use for such exploitative connections.

To address the issue, it is essential to initiate a dialogue between tribal elders, youth, legal advocates and women's right organizations. The objective must be to redefine and modernize customary laws to align with principles of gender justice, youth protection and human rights.

Legal reform, combined with community education and empowerment programs, is crucial in addressing the misuse of polygamy. Without systematic changes, the cycle of exploitation, mental trauma and broken family structures will continue, undermining both tradition and progress. As the state stands at cross roads of tradition and development, a balance and inclusive approach is required-one that blends customary wisdom with legal fairness and cultural pride with human dignity. Only through such an approach can tribal communities navigate a path forward that honors their heritage while embracing a just and equitable future.

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